

SPOKEN TESTIMONY TO  
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE  
September 5, 2007

Mr. Chairman, Representatives, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today regarding the state of our bridges, and Chairman Oberstar's National Highway System Bridge Reconstruction Initiative.

My name is Kirk Steudle, and I am Director and Chief Executive Officer at the Michigan Department of Transportation.

First, I'd like to express my sympathy to the families who have suffered because of the tragic collapse of the I-35W bridge. When a tragedy like this occurs, it ripples across the transportation industry. Believe me when I say that, as transportation professionals, we all take it very much to heart.

More funding for bridges is clearly needed, but I strongly urge you not to stop there. Additional funding should be combined with sound long term data driven asset management practices.

I emphasize that, because federal road and bridge funding programs have not kept pace with the state of the practice of asset management, and the rules that govern use of those funds are not always compatible with asset management.

For example, in the past two years, MDOT spent less than 90 percent of its federal bridge funds, not because we weren't investing in bridges, but because the rules for those funds are too restrictive. They are not compatible with MDOT's asset management approach.

As part of that approach, we inspect our bridges more thoroughly and more often than required by federal law. We set strategic goals for road and bridge preservation. We manage our network of bridges, slowing their deterioration with capital preventive maintenance.

In order to achieve our bridge goals, we had to look outside the Federal Highway Bridge Program. We made the choice to dedicate an additional \$75 million annually in state funds, just

for bridge preservation. As an example, Michigan invests \$190 million annually in bridges. \$100 million federal funds and \$90 million in state funds.

An asset management approach keeps bridges from deteriorating, and systematically upgrades those in poor condition. In 1998, Michigan had 21 percent poor bridges and we improved just over 100 structurally deficient bridges each year, and added about 162 other bridges a year to that list. Fixing the “worst first” was a losing proposition, because as we focused all our attention on the worst bridges, the other bridges were still deteriorating. We were in a hole we could not easily get out of.

But today, as a result of our data driven asset management choices, we are making progress. We have completely reversed those numbers, improving about 145 bridges a year off the structurally deficient list, and adding only about 86 bridges a year to that list and are now down to 14 percent poor. A 7 percent increase in bridge condition at a time when many of our original interstate bridges were approaching 50 years old.

With MDOT’s experience in mind, I would like to recommend that you revise the Federal Highway Bridge Program to allow full expenditure of bridge funds under an asset management approach. To do this will require some specific changes:

- First, eliminate the “ten year rule” that prevents state DOTs from using federal bridge funds on a bridge more than once in ten years, so they can pursue less expensive preventive maintenance and bridge repairs that preserve the bridge before it deteriorates.
- Second, eliminate the 100 point sufficiency ratings and the arbitrary cutoff points for bridge fund eligibility. If a state has an asset management program in place, it should be able to use federal funds on the slate of bridge projects it identifies as most efficiently preserving the bridge network.

- If you have to keep the sufficiency rating, at least give us more flexibility. For example, today states are not allowed to use federal bridge funds to improve a structurally deficient bridge deck if other elements, such as superstructure and substructure, are still in good condition. Let me give you a specific Michigan example. We have 608 bridges listed as structurally deficient, 223 are due to the bridges having poor bridge decks - 43 are very poor. This is over 1/3 of the list and these are not eligible for highway bridge program funds. From an asset management standpoint, this simply does not make sense, because a structurally deficient bridge deck actually accelerates the deterioration of other bridge elements. It's like saying you won't replace the shingles on your leaky roof until the moisture has destroyed the drywall or cracked the foundation.

In conclusion, let me say that a short-term bridge program is a good start, but I strongly encourage you to remember that the same challenges that exist for the bridge program exist for the entire transportation system. They just have not been as visibly and tragically demonstrated.

Bridges are tied to the roads they connect. Many of Michigan's structurally deficient bridges are on major freeways that also need repair. In many cases, we can not just fix the bridge without doing major road work as well.

And funding for that road work is uncertain. Inflation has eroded the buying power of the federal motor fuel tax. The Federal Highway Trust Fund is expected to have a shortfall of \$4.3 billion in 2009. As you consider the need for bridge funding, I encourage you not to lose sight of the entire transportation funding picture.

Thank you, Chairman Oberstar, for bringing this important and necessary debate on bridge funding and programmatic reform to the forefront.